

Sculpture Cast as Satire: Misgivings on the Quest for Beauty

/ Dr Susie Lingham

1. Ideals & Idealizations

Can you polish your mysterious mirror

*And leave no blemish?*¹

The sculptural object occupies the same space that a human body does – we encounter it as we encounter one another, within the reality of space as we experience it. On a larger scale, and when intended for permanence, sculptural form becomes a landmark, and displacing more than space, it is a significant factor in placemaking. Emplaced thus, it also stakes a claim on time, tending towards timelessness, as memorials and historical monuments tenaciously hold on to their place in the present, and moor in our cultural consciousness. And nothing seems to rightfully occupy space and timelessness more than embodiments of the ideals of “Beauty”, where the quest for “Truth” is often conflated. Ancient sites and works of art marked by these ambitions, are in our present time considered as part of the world's cultural heritage, and continue to fascinate and hold us in thrall. Ensclosed in our minds – alluded to by Lao Tzu as the “mysterious mirror” – is a space that is haunted by seemingly timeless ideals of beauty *and* truth, ideals that regulate the evaluation and judgement of the self, the other, nature and art. Despite radical paradigmatic shifts of perspective in the contemporary artworld, “Beauty” lingers on as an imperative, and we continue to contend with expectations of “perfection” – both in art and the human form. However, only the ethereal and ambiguous *concept* of beauty is timeless, and not necessarily the era-bound perspectives of what might constitute beauty, as consensus for what is “beautiful” constantly shifts. And then, there’s “Power”. No doubting that being in the presence of beauty is a

¹ Tzu Lao, Tao Te Ching, trans. D. C. Lau, (London: Penguin, 1963), Book One, X., 14.

powerful experience: it seems to transcend the ugly fact that the pursuit of beauty at all costs can be quite a grotesque and disenchanting process indeed.

Inevitably, art has always been a partner – reluctantly or otherwise – to projections of power, and the beautiful work of art has been used variously as ruse, muse and midwife for political intention and power throughout history, and a proxy for abstract relations of power that have real-life influence on the individual and society at large. Artists are themselves aware of this power of form and image, and sometimes deploy their own agendas accordingly, for better or worse. The evolving roles of craftsman, architect, and artist, from anonymity to the non-anonymous complicity and affiliation with power-projection, have come increasingly to the fore with every passing generation, where the ambitious, and necessarily “beautiful” work of art – architectural and sculptural form in particular – is cast as the emblematic right hand of cultural power and national pride, with the objective of keeping the eye, and so heart and mind, in awe.

Critically, the end – beauty – seems to transcend, if not exactly justify, the means: the inescapable fact that it is money and power that enable the sublime expression of beauty on particular scales, and if power attempts to control Beauty's inherently ambiguous influence, than both expression and experience can veer into an encounter with the “ugly” face of unmediated power. On a sufficiently monumental scale, the ugly has also had its time basking in the indiscriminate glow of power. Conversely, emblems to power are the first to be defaced and destroyed by rising opposing forces, or when one era asserts itself over another epoch's “outdated” values, ideals and beliefs. And tastes. And therein lies beauty's vexing vulnerability – it is also bound to sometimes arbitrary value-systems and notions of “virtue”.

Sculpture's sense of its own presence has not had to undergo the same existential crisis of painting and the art historical issues of two-dimensional representation, the real, and realism. In particular, the human body, sculpted in three dimensions, still effortlessly engages the imagination. And yet, a unique contemporary instance of when sculpture is literally given the platform to perform satirical self-critique is the “Fourth Plinth Project” in Trafalgar Square,

in the beating heart of London, where a sculpted Nelson has long towered heroically on his column here over this great city, in front of the National Gallery, amidst many memorials and monuments that mark centuries of the United Kingdom's history. This particular empty fourth plinth was actually built in 1841, and was apparently intended to uphold a statue of William IV. A lack of funds has, fortuitously, after over 150 years, enabled a series of contemporary public commissions, each of which has made their mark on art history by creating their own socio-cultural reflections of the times, beginning initially as three successive commissions by the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce. One such commission was Mark Wallinger's 1999 *Ecce Homo*. Wallinger's singularly undramatic figure of Christ stands very human, barefoot, with crown of thorns and hands behind his back, apparently standing before his unjust judges (unseen, so it could be us), just before the sentence to crucifixion. A stark and deliberate contrast indeed to the whole concept of putting heroes on pedestals – a powerful sculptural commentary indeed.²

In 2005, the Fourth Plinth commissions began proper, and first positioned thereon was Marc Quinn's 13-tonne figurative sculpture with its no-nonsense descriptive title *Alison Lapper Pregnant*. This work is exemplary of contemporary art, critically pushing us far beyond the conditioned notions of beauty in art *and* perceived irregularities in nature and “ugliness” in the human form at the same time. Lapper is a real living person, depicted as she was then – a naked pregnant woman who suffers from phocomelia: she was born without arms and shortened legs.³ “Disability” writ large and unabashed, some might say. Jonathan Jones writing in 2005 declares: “Quinn's sculpture is very beautiful [...] It brings to mind the classical statues that grace our greatest museums, other sculptures from other times which also have, whether by accident or design, missing arms and legs.”⁴ In fact, the sculptor Quinn brings us face to face with nature, human nature, art, and truth.

We find revisions and inversions of these very issues in the Singapore-based sculptor Yeo Chee Kiong's solo exhibition *A Beauty Centre*, sited in Juming Museum, Taiwan, which is, significantly, a *sculptor's* museum founded by the Taiwanese sculptor Ju Ming, known for his abstract-angular solid figures in classical “Taichi” poses. As its name suggests, *A Beauty*

² “Ecce Homo, Mark Wallinger, 1999,” Art in the Open | An Open-City resource, accessed May 30, 2017, http://www.artintheopen.org.uk/impact/showcasing_exemplars_EcceHomo.html

³ Harry Rosehill, “Every Work Of Art On The Fourth Plinth (So Far),” Londonist, January 18, 2017, <https://londonist.com/london/art-and-photography/every-work-of-art-on-the-fourth-plinth-so-far>

⁴ Rachel Cooke, “Art: Alison Lapper Pregnant,” The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, September 18, 2005), <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2005/sep/18/art>

Centre is curated as a tongue-in-cheek pseudo-spa experience, where the viewer participates in “self-improving” activities, being given space and time to reflect on their own ideals, as well as contemporary “self-enhancement” obsessions, from fitness and body “sculpting”, and the breathless race to achieve “mindfulness”, to flaunting a sense of a self-loved self. The exhibition is navigated via “spa-zones” with names like “We detoxify Inner Self”; “Future Weapon”; “The Healing Room”; “We Stop Time”; “I am Goddess”; “Vague Vogue”; “A Beauty Dining Club”; “The Cosmos Energy Picnic Program”, and “Look Good Naked”. Quite a “work-out” in one exhibition!

Central to Yeo's *A Beauty Centre* are his exaggeratedly female globular forms, bloated on a caricatured sexuality that verges on the comic, grotesque and cute at the same time. While Quinn's *Alison Lapper Pregnant* is an instance of Art mirroring life when it does not seem “natural”, and transcending preconceptions of womanly beauty, Yeo's “*Ideal Lady*” series can be seen as Art mirroring its own mirrored artifice, yet remaining deeply inspired by natural forces. Also of relevance here is Surrealist Hans Bellmer's life-sized female doll assemblages of the 1930s, which though purposefully incomplete as human-like forms, are uncannily excessive and explicitly sexual. There is definitely a sense of excess sexuality in Yeo's cumulus-cloudlike gorged and turgid female pink and silver forms, as they appear to luxuriate in their swelling roundedness. Excess as opposed to elegance animates Yeo's sculptural forms of feminine beauty: they straddle inherited baroque *and* rococo aesthetics, and we can accept that both approaches are inspirationally available to contemporary practitioners regardless of socio-cultural contexts. Baroque? Because the cloud-like female forms are embodiments of the ornately “misshapen pearl” that is eponymous of this art historical period. And Rococo? Because they make light the heaviness of the floridly ornate, ushering in a mood of playful, pastel and fluffy frivolity.

However, there are also more sombre dimensions to *A Beauty Centre*: serpentine and humanoid shrivelled knitted “skins” collectively called “*Vague Vogue*” hang bat-like on the walls, like strange “shadows” of these fleshy exuberant figures; a dark brooding huddle of four ornate conjoined chairs, each referencing a different era, e.g. Louis XIV and Georgian styled pieces, upholstered in fur, damask, velvet and leather – all in black, like rococo redacted – is the site for a “beauty dining club” experience where participants can watch videos of “*I'm Crawling Inside the Body of a Black Serpent named Night*” which show performances of a person moving inside the knitted tubular form. There's more: in another

room, *"I am Goddess"* interviews are screened, featuring local participants and students as they discuss their beauty-related fears, desires and affirmations. And then there are lightboxes on the walls: one set of nine showing faceless "shadow ladies" wearing comical black bulbous ceramic "wigs", opposite the real ceramic wigs on shelves, and another set called *"Future Weapon"* showing manga-inspired figures with "Bimbombs" – presumably playing on the terms "bimbo" and "sex-bomb".

This is all a motley mix, and can be quite baffling. Particularly, in creating exaggerated feminine forms that out-Rubens Rubenesque women, and shapeless knitted shadow-garments that await women to "fill-out" and perform within, Yeo's critique of contemporary society's narcissistic obsessions could be read as veering on the voyeuristic, or misogynistic. Perhaps so. Still, the exhibition seems more inflected by an indulgent, slightly exasperated and perplexed, yet self-implicating and willing-to-be-beguiled "male" perspective.

We begin to see how these very different aspects of the exhibition jigsaw when we get a glimpse into the trajectories of Yeo's practice over a decade. Importantly, the works are also inspired by natural forms and forces, in particular clouds and water. There seems to be a harking back to the Chinese sage Lao Tzu and the classic *Tao Te Ching*, which is fundamentally a treatise on the wise handling of power, and the power of paradox in understanding the self. The mysterious indefinable "Tao" – the "Way" – *pivots on paradox*. And one of the poetic allusions to its ungraspable power is the associating of the element of water and its characteristics to that which is understood as the "female": water's indistinct, shape-shifting formless-form and "softness" is the strongest force known in Nature.

2. Form, Force & Flow

*Be like water making its way through cracks. [...] Empty your mind, be formless.
Shapeless, like water. If you put water into a cup, it becomes the cup. You put water*

*into a bottle and it becomes the bottle. You put it in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Now water can flow or it can crash. Be water, my friend.*⁵

Yeo, when asked what his favourite works of sculpture were, answers unhesitatingly, albeit qualifying that this was when he was in his “figurative period” as a sculptor. He says he was obsessed and intrigued by *The Three Shades* – the dark repeated figures in Rodin’s *Gates of Hell*. Interestingly Yeo calls them the “three shadows”. And, Yeo emphasises, he was *not* much into Rodin’s now-iconic 1902 work *The Thinker*.

From 2002 to 2004 Yeo left tropical Singapore for Scotland, for further studies. Yeo says he was accepted into the Glasgow School of Art, apparently because they were impressed with his figurative work. But, the completely different weather and seasonal conditions sparked an epiphany which made him move from the figurative into attempting to materialize less tangible, more elemental phenomena e.g., water as waves, waveforms, bubbles as well as what he calls the “negative of the bubble form”. He shifted into a more “conceptual” approach to sculpture, setting a list of quite stringent criteria for himself:

1. I will not do clay modelling.
2. I will not do casting.
3. I will not do figurative work.
4. I will only ask Questions – based on a single question, come up with a possible solution, which will necessarily be paradoxically, to materialize the [impossible] question/phenomenon, e.g.:
 - a) what is the formless

⁵ “Bruce Lee Quotes,” Largest Collection Of Bruce Lee Quotes, accessed May 30, 2017, <http://www.bruceleequotes.org/>

- b) how to represent Night
- c) how to give form to a wave

While in Europe, Yeo had the opportunity to experience artwork of the highest order: he was very taken by Bill Viola's monumental water-and-fire inspired video works in London, and in particular was impressed by Jeff Koons's kitsch, highly polished balloon sculptures working in contrast to the classical spaces within which they were installed. This "high-finish" inspired a sense of "quality" that re-imbued materiality with its own enigmatic significance and freed Yeo from the need to make "meaning" or to attach meaningful titles to his works. What came to the fore then, and continues to inform his sculptural processes now, was this sense of *qualia*, the quality of the wrought object, and the inherent and transformable beauty of material – materiality that has traditionally belonged to the realm of the sculptor: stone, clay, wood, bronze. And, he wanted to work *around* and *with* the inherent formlessness of water. Clouds, shadows and rain seeped into the cracks of his thinking, and making.

Nonetheless, as a sculptor, the human form must still have lurked in the corners of his mind. As we note from the Fourth Plinth works by Wallinger and Quinn, the sculpted human form still has the power to move us. While Yeo was in Europe all those years ago, he went to Florence, and recalls a momentous evening. "I saw *David*", he says simply, evidently moved beyond words. In Milan, he joined the endless serpentine queue to see Leonardo's *Last Supper*, where visitors were only allowed one minute to stand in front of the iconic work. "I didn't want to go away", Yeo says wistfully.

In these instances, the sculptor seems to have felt the sense of being overwhelmed by the sublime audacity of *scale* and indefinable *qualia* of these master pieces, which must haunt him still, as evident in the echoes of Koons's shiny "balloon-like" objects (the bulbous *Ideal Lady* series) and Leonardo's *Last Supper* (the very long 12-tables-in-one *Wild-Banquet-Every-Table*) returning as refrain in the flow of this exhibition. And when wall-hung, the

silhouette of one of Yeo's *Vague Vogue* knit-garments in particular bears uncanny resemblance to Rodin's *The Three Shades*.

Vague Vogue consists of a series of works called "*Someone Took Over My Shadow*". The pieces are intended to be the artist's own "shadows", which he "loans" to others to inhabit, and within which they would have complete "autonomy" to move as they will. As planned, this gives the artist the uncanny feeling of being severed from his own shadow. The piece that resembles *The Three Shades* is designed to "hold" four women performing as fluid and flexible "shadow ladies", who elegantly and sensuously glide amongst the artist's other works, like *Four*, instead of "Three Graces". Embodied, they seem to summon the amorphous and indistinct shapes of female desire – shadowy female desire as imagined by the male artist. Dis-mantled, they drape on the walls like an elegy to the absence of femininity, shadows hanging as *casts* of Yeo's desire, which paradoxically make space for male presence *as* feminine absence. Very Yin and Yang. The pursuit of embodied beauty, where female desire to attain physical perfection is cast in relation to male desire to inhabit the enigmatic spaces of female desire, is intensified. *We Stop Time*, the serpentine knit-forms, sutured together from winter wear, are also "garments". The tubular form is designed for a body to move *through* like a force of bodily peristalsis, stimulating muscular waves of constriction and relaxation, as can be observed in the video "*I'm Crawling Inside the Body of a Black Serpent named Night*". Here, someone, invited by the artist, becomes the "swallowed" performer within. Curiously, swallower and swallowed become one: the "serpent" moves only because the crawling performer moves forward. These forms and motions "work" in two ways – at once phallic and vaginal – like male and female desire in contiguity.

Disembodied, the various black and grey knit pieces of *Vague Vogue* and *We Stop Time* mostly look like giant squashed bugs, worms, bats, alien forms. But, besides being the "negative space" of human anatomy and desire, these pieces are also inspired by bodies of water in nature. The garments invoke the magical rain-bringing cloud-shadows ever-drifting on undulating Scottish moorland, what the artist calls the "unsettled conditions" of rolling rainclouds. Clouds have a visual resemblance to wool, and this material is aptly employed to conjure the ungraspable flexibility of shadows. Wool also reappears here in another series of

Yeo's work: the soft sculptural installation collectively called *Silent Rain* – black, green and white cloud-forms descend like giant tassels in knitted strands of “rain”, each made at different times in the artist's career. The white giant tassel named *White Cloud of Jin Shan* was made specifically for this show in 2017 by local Taiwanese living in the area.

While the wider scope of the sculptor Yeo Chee Kiong's artistic pursuits pertain more to the representation of elemental natural forms and the frustratingly furtive, less-than-solid aspects of natural phenomena – in particular the element of water in each of its various states – the context of Yeo's *A Beauty Centre* as presented here in the Juming Museum is more directly didactic. The sculptor chooses to shape the stations of each experience within the art gallery as an interactive beauty salon or spa, where different “body parts”, aspects of “well-being”, and “fashion consciousness” get specific attention, with each “zone” tending to these various demands for “aesthetic enhancement” while operating as room for “self-reflection”. Contrasts abound throughout the exhibition, e.g., the black, soft-knit shadowy flaccidities aesthetically exaggerate the solid, florid frivolity of the neo-rococo pink and silver figures; ornate armchairs are cunningly carpentered and upholstered to be both luxurious and forbidding at once; forms border on amorphous shapelessness yet are meticulously wrought and materially mesmerising.

Together, these expressions of exuberance and restraint, excess and lack, attraction and repulsion, seem to perform as satirical commentary on the convulsive, contradictory nature of human desire. The exhibition thrums with schizophrenic incongruence.

3. Artifice, Excess& Paradox

Know the male

But keep to the role of the female

And be a ravine to the empire.⁶

⁶ Lao Tzu, Book One, XXXVIII, 33.

*In the world there is nothing more submissive and weak than water. Yet for attacking that which is hard and strong nothing can surpass it. This is because there is nothing that can take its place.*⁷

Slipping between the structured artifice of the “beauty-centre” as organising principle of the exhibition, the elemental qualities of water return in various iterations: visual and conceptual leitmotifs of watery elements pervade this spa-styled exhibition. At the beginning of the choreographed experience, one enters a space where a bathtub “spills” strawberry-milkshake pink deliquescence on the entire floor in a gallery, and a monstrous pink bubble of femininity looms. Both the pink displacement of “liquid” and the figure are visually incommensurate with the silver-footed white bathtub at the other end of the space – which seems comparatively delicate, even if lined inside with large pink globs of bubble bath “traces”. A sculptural cautionary sign, strategically placed, warns, in comic exaggeration, of the very “wet” floor.

This sculptural spill is an artfully controlled pouring of epoxy paint already solid yet still appearing viscous and liquid. The cumulus cloud-like feminine form in the same glistening enamel shade of pink tiptoes in exaggerated coquettishness on an equally pink ornate-legged “padded” footstool, as if having just arisen splashily from the bathtub at the other end of the space, coy girlishness exuding incongruously from her fat-fingered gesture. This particular milkshake-pink figure is strangely reminiscent of the at least 25,000 year old Palaeolithic “Venus of Willendorf” limestone figurine discovered in 1908: faceless, and tiny, only about four and a half inches tall, she is distinctly and exaggeratedly female in form, and described as displaying the highly desirable trait of corpulence, which indicated much-valued female fertility.⁸ Fertility, form and desire have always been inextricably bound in both the natural and human worlds. Yet another embodiment of desire, another Venus, is conjured: Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, as she arises from the sea. Yeo's pink “*The Secret of Victoria*” (obviously a spoof of the lingerie fashion line “Victoria's Secret”) can be recognized as a contemporary

⁷ Lao Tzu, Book Two, LXXVIII, 85.

⁸ “How Art Made the World . Episodes . More Human than Human . Venus of Willendorf,” PBS (Public Broadcasting Service), accessed May 30, 2017, <http://www.pbs.org/howartmadetheworld/episodes/human/venus/>

comic *and* sexy avatar of Venus, rebirthed from her bath as a poised, exaggerated incarnation of a monstrous female desire to be desired, somehow still charming the bewildered male gaze.⁹

In the next space, *Silent Rains* soft falls as a wool-knitted “cloud forest” in green, white, and black, bringing “rain” indoors – another allusion to wetness. In the *Beauty Centre* narrative it purports to conjure Nature's “healing” powers, and we are encouraged to indulge in “cleansing” and quieting the mind through immersive “detoxification” by walking through the soft sculptural forms. Visually, the rounded tops of the “clouds” echo the pink bubble-bath skin inside the tub, which is reiterated in the curves of the excessively voluptuous “cloud-Venus”. The strands of knitted rain hanging off the clouds are in turn reflected on the room-wide pink spill on the floor. Inverted reflections of the black ceramic “cloudy-wigged” shadow ladies as well as the manga lightboxes from another adjoining space are also fleetingly caught on this overflow of pink.

Pivoting on what the artist projects as the absurd extremes that women in particular endure to attain beauty, *A Beauty Centre* seems to be both comic satire of this human quest for personal “skin-deep” beauty, and, at the same time, operates as an allegorical reminder that “true beauty” lies within the human spirit in communion with nature. As a satirical-allegorical exercise, it is fairly straightforward yet the exhibition – fleetingly – also takes a sidelong glance at art's demands on itself. Artistic ideals of “perfection” are evident, as the artist takes pride in the production quality of each object, with a serious and self-conscious focus on the flawless finish of the patina – the skin – of each sculptural form. The sculptor too is on a quest for beauty.

⁹ Posture, poise, balance, strength – these characteristics invoke Bruce Lee's conceptions of the body beautiful and power willed, and wielded. Bruce Lee sculpted his body through strict regimes, but also allegedly strategically removed ribs from his torso to attain an ideal masculine form. This is not unlike how the corset has disciplined women's bodies in the past, and even today there are women actually bypassing the corset and removing ribs to attain what they deem to be aesthetic perfection e.g., “glamorous” cartoon characters like Jessica Rabbit, an instance of a fantastically tiny-waisted femininity completely outside the realm of nature.

It is obvious that Yeo's earlier declaration to work with only the formless elemental forces of nature is thwarted by the continuing desire to create the human form: the sculptor succumbs, and we are witness to a collision of forces and forms, e.g., the molecular structure of vaporous water crashing and condensing into a semblance of human female form – water vapour held together and *incorporated* as somehow female, just as clouds sensuously sculpt our imaginations. What influences the shape of the experience of *A Beauty Centre* seems to be these repeated collisions of the sculptor's twin obsessions: the beauty of the natural phenomenon of water as formless force *and* the culturally-shaped human form, where both forces and forms are invoked, yoked, and incarnated as art. And while art may be a quest for beauty and what beauty can be, the artist is aware that the beautiful in Nature just *is*.

This instantiation of Yeo's oeuvre within the conceptual schema of *A Beauty Centre* seemingly turns the tables on the era of the Selfie, and its obsessions with body image and “obesity”. It is the *quest* for beauty itself that is being satirized. There is a didactic aesthetics of the absurd at play: *A Beauty Centre* invites viewers to take a good, but not overly-harsh look at themselves looking at themselves – amidst hopes, desires, misgivings and all.

Situated outdoors, amidst more prancing and pirouetting monstrously voluptuous figures in shiny mirror-silver and pastel pink, the obliquely momentous counterpoint to this extended “beauty salon” satire is *Wild-Banquet-Every-Table*, the 12-tables-as-one work. This work, in austere jet black, elongated and curvaceous yet standing solidly on many legs and bearing a watery surface, is where the artist brings a liquid mirror to the beauty of ever-changing Nature, barefaced to the open sky.

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